

It has been an eventful week in our beautiful province. I have experienced a range of emotion in rollercoaster fashion and I have spoken with many others who were similarly affected. While I have had many thoughts about what ensued on the streets of Vancouver, I find myself zeroing in on the role of peer pressure, especially on our teenagers.

One of the commonly raised questions is "Where were the parents?" and how can young people fall so easily into the trap of following the crowd? Well, peer pressure is a powerful influence on adolescents.

One of the reasons for this is that they spend much more time with their peers than with their parents. Kids have their own language, their own dress code, their own world view, and their own benchmarks for acceptance. That age-old need to belong is humming inside the teenage brain.

The Centre for Disease Control and Prevention says peer pressure is real and many adolescents are engaging in behaviours that put them at risk due to pressure from their friends. Peer pressure can account for the fact that 25% of high school kids smoke, that one in four kids have had five or more consecutive alcoholic drinks in the past month and, of those, 25% admit to driving while under the influence. Twenty-five percent of adolescents aged 14-17 have tried drugs and one in three kids age 14 and 15 are sexually active with a-third not using birth control. Health professionals point to teen peer pressure as the clear culprit in these risky behaviours.

Poor self-esteem and low levels of self-confidence are consistently identified as factors in peer pressure that leads to risky and destructive behaviours. Parents express their frustration and fear at watching their delightful children grow into sullen, non-communicative teens who disappear into a peer group that in my day was known as the wrong crowd. Simply forbidding your child to hang with this group is futile. To do so is to push them into the arms of the enemy, so to speak.

There are a few suggestions that may mitigate the situation and, hopefully, as parent and child, you can weather the storm without a long-term effect on life and limb. One is to stay involved in your child's activities. Set some expectations around communication and outside contacts, such

as knowing who your child is with and where she or he will be during the time away from home. Check your child's homework no matter what grade level, and keep a firm eye on grades. Dropping grades are a flag that needs to be addressed.

Remember that kids are drawn to peers because it feeds them in some way. Sometimes they are not able to see the negative input they are getting from peers because it affirms their belonging. You as the parent can offer the positive input that will eventually rise to the top. Give your child some space, listen and support, and most of all say "I love you" as often as possible.